

LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

► From a hardwood that withstands humidity to a terrazzo made of waste, **Lucy Land** discovers the latest innovative products at the UAE's first purpose-built material library, Colab

"No design is possible until the materials with which you design are completely understood." This is a quote by famed American-German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. You may have already spotted it, as the words are emblazoned in a bold white and turquoise font on the glass-fronted facade of Colab, the first purpose-built material library in the UAE, which opened its doors in Dubai Design District this summer.

The quote presents a quandary that this new social business venture aims to address through its material archive, inspiration and learning centre. And it's already living up to its name – a play on "collaboration" – by bringing the creative community together under one roof to ultimately elevate the region's design industry.

One of the space's main features is its carefully curated Innovation Wall, which changes bi-monthly and is currently home to 20 exciting new bio-materials, all of which come from Material Connexion's subscription-based materials library. The consultancy – whose clients include Adidas, Nike and BMW – offers the world's largest selection of innovative, sustainable materials and processes, boasting both physical and online archives of 10,000-plus samples.

"We want people who visit Colab to touch and explore the materials," enthuses Colab's creative director, Richard

Wilson. Indeed, the panels on display can be easily lifted off the wall and put back again. So, if you're wondering what a fabric made from cork would feel like (a soft felt) or what a material made from coffee grounds and newspaper waste is similar to (a sturdy papier-mache), then this is the place to be. "We're bringing materials, processes and innovations from across the world to the local design and creative community and it's a free-to-use resource," adds Wilson.

The gallery space runs alongside Colab's commercial sample library, which features a collection that is constantly growing. Notably, the hub offers an unbiased approach to connecting designers with leading manufacturers, who have a commercial interest in supplying to the region and who are equally passionate about material innovation. "We're completely independent, so we won't recommend one over another," Wilson insists. "Every material is different and has its place, and it's important for architects and designers to think about their selection rather than to simply choose from what's easily available in the region."

It was a lack of choice of materials that initially inspired Wilson, who has spent 30 years in the UAE, to set up Colab in the first place. "I saw a genuine thirst for a wider palette of materials for designers to choose from," he says. He also sees a need to play to the UAE's strengths. "As a new

city, unlike London or New York that have mature markets, Dubai also has a smaller population. Rather than being a consumption hub, Dubai is a centre of influence in the Middle East – it offers the perfect place for pilot and showcase projects to test out new materials."

For this reason, Colab can perhaps best be described as a candy shop for designers and creatives. Samples available on-site include Foresso, a pretty timber terrazzo made from wood waste from British sawmills, as well as handcrafted multilayer wooden wall coverings created by bending the veneers into 3D shapes by Moko Interior (you can play around with a miniature collection of its 12 motifs to create your own design). Then there's Karuun, a natural, versatile alternative to plastic, which is made from rattan palm.

Wilson's personal favourite material is a thermally modified American ash, a moderately fast-growing hardwood that has been subjected to high temperatures in a controlled environment. The treated wood does not absorb moisture, ensuring it is less prone to warping and twisting with changes in humidity – and it no longer provides a food source for insects and fungi, making it decay-resistant. It's perfect for countries such as the UAE.

"It's exciting to see how companies are rethinking traditional materials," Wilson adds. "This thermally modified wood is durable enough



With its modular seating, large screen and 3D printer, Colab also serves as an event and activation space



Richard Wilson, above, is the creative director of Colab, right, a purpose-built material library in D3, which aims to bring the creative community under one roof. The space displays samples of sustainable materials, such as Foresso, left, a timber terrazzo made from wood waste from British sawmills
Photos: Colab



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Colab is a social business venture that offers a material library, inspiration and learning centre

for external use, and it has a beautiful dark colour. It can go grey, with time, but you can sand it down to bring back its chocolate tone." It also happens to have a wonderful wood fire scent, too.

This passion for advancing and modernising materials is clearly paying off for Wilson. "We're receiving samples on a daily basis from manufacturers offering materials that are well-suited to the Middle East," he says. "So this isn't a place to visit only once a month." Wilson also urges suppliers to send in samples for Colab to display, as it's basically free advertising. "We encourage designers to come in and create a mood board, which we'll display and post on Instagram. It gives designers an idea of materials they haven't used before." The current mood board on show has been made by award-winning design studio Brand Creative.

This is no one-trick pony, either, as Colab also serves as an event and activation space, as well as a networking hub,

with its modular seating, large screen and 3D printer. "Our mission is to provide designers with a creative space in which to innovate, contemplate and understand all aspects of materials," says Wilson. "A programme of talks, seminars, panel discussions and presentations will aim to foster creativity. In addition, lunch and learn sessions, Continuing Professional Development presentations and networking evenings will also feature on a regular basis."

The line-up of events has so far included a 3D-printing open day, while specialists 3F Studio presented its first-of-a-kind 3D-printed translucent facade made from fully recyclable plastic. This reflects Wilson's keen advocacy of sustainability. "The design community has an important role to play in considering the environment, particularly with the development of technical innovations. Plus, a sustainable approach doesn't necessarily have to cost more. If everyone decides that environmentally

friendly manufacturing is the new norm, then it becomes more lucrative for manufacturers to invest in it, and costs will consequently come down."

In its mission to raise the benchmark for design across the region, Colab will, no doubt, succeed through bringing about connections and collaborations. Its goal is to work with everyone in the industry and beyond, from educational institutions, such as Zayed University, and professional bodies, including the Royal Institute of British Architects, to the likes of the Emirates Green Building Council and small, boutique design companies.

"We're going to make sure that every event is insightful and people take something away from each one," says Wilson. "We want this to be a space for everyone to come together and if conversations start here and lead to something amazing out there, then our job's done."

More information is available at colab.ae

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Keep things simple with these pared back accessories

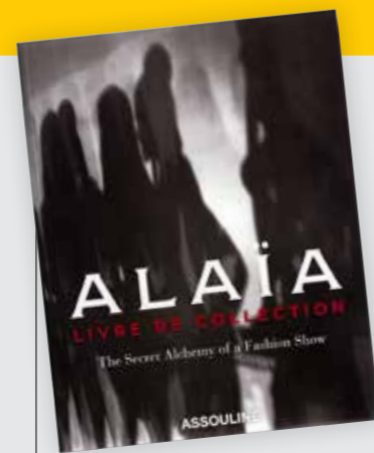


Cool kitchens

Smeg makes some of the coolest kitchenware around. If you can't extend to the fridge, you can make do with this gleaming black kettle. ► Smeg kettle, Dh679, Virgin Megastores across the UAE and www.virginmegastore.ae

Crossing the line

With its linear black-and-white patterning, the Essaouira chest of drawers makes a bold design statement. ► Essaouira chest, Dh5,985, Marina Home stores across the UAE



Fashion chronicles

A recording of all the emotions, colours, fabrics and shapes that go into creating a fashion show, *Alaia: Livre de Collection* offers a behind-the-scenes insight to the world of the legendary designer, who passed away in 2017. ► *Alaia: Livre de Collection*, Dh200, www.assouline.com



Sitting pretty

Lying low to the ground, with sumptuous cushions and intricate leather detailing, this is a chair you'll always want to sink into. ► Rally chair, Dh12,500, Marina Home stores across the UAE

Floral fancies

Make sure your home smells as good as it looks with Byredo's Fleur Fantôme room spray, which will infuse your space with delicate floral aromas. ► Room spray, Dh350, www.farfetch.com



A stitch in time

Meticulously hand-embroidered, Tom Dixon's Stitch cushion will add a touch of texture to a minimalist design scheme. ► Stitch cushion, Dh938, www.tomdixon.net